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Restraint in Terrorist Groups and Radical Milieus: Towards a Research Agenda

by Joel Busher and Tore Bjørgo

Abstract

Questions about why and how terrorist groups, radical milieus and the individuals that comprise them do not carry out more violence than they do – particularly when they apparently have the ability and opportunity to do so – have tended to receive less scholarly attention than questions about what leads towards violence or why it abates. Yet if we look closely at almost any group, we can usually find evidence of some kind of restraint taking place, whether in the form of limitations on what or who is deemed an ‘appropriate’ target, or placing limits on the scale or style of violence that militants should deploy. This Special Issue of Perspectives on Terrorism, for which this article comprises the introduction, responds to this state of affairs by bringing together a series of articles that focus specifically on the issue of restraint within terrorist groups and radical milieus. This article provides a brief conceptual sketch of restraint, and makes the case that paying greater attention to restraint can offer rich rewards for researchers, policymakers and practitioners concerned with understanding and responding to political violence associated with terrorist groups and radical milieus, as well as other forms of political violence.

Keywords: restraint; terrorism; radical milieus; limits on violence; political violence

Introduction

While scholars of terrorism and radical milieus have made significant advances in understanding the onset and escalation of violence,[1] how such violence declines or ends,[2] and why and how militants deradicalise and disengage,[3] they have made less progress in understanding how and why these groups, and the individuals that comprise them, do not carry out more violence than they do, particularly when they apparently have the ability and opportunity to do so.[4] Where this issue has perhaps received most attention has been in the literature concerned with the effectiveness of otherwise of violent and non-violent campaigns: a literature that indicates that part of the reason militants hold back from further escalation of violence is likely to be that such violence is often at best ineffective and at worse counter-productive.[5] Yet even here, this literature tells us relatively little about restraint as a process: about where, when and how it emerges, gains traction, diffuses through the group or organisation or, indeed, where, when and how it does not.

That this is the case is perhaps unsurprising. Within much of the research on terrorism and radical milieus, there are a number of conceptual and methodological factors that direct our attention away from questions about how and why such actors do not engage in more violence. These include the tendency to focus more attention on cases where violence reaches the thresholds required for inclusion in existing databases than those where it does not; the dominance of binaries such as ‘violent vs. non-violent’, or ‘lethal vs. non-lethal’ which, while useful in some respects, can leave out the kind of descriptive nuance of varying degrees, styles and targets of violence that can encourage reflection on how, why and when people hold back from further violence; and the tendency for research on violence prevention to be oriented primarily towards questions about what ‘we’, as external policy-, civil society- or academic actors, can do to reduce the threat of violence, rather than how members of militant groups themselves can be part of ‘the solution’. Furthermore, living as we do in an era in which *The Terrorist* has become one of the archetypal villains [6] and in which we are often confronted with graphic images of, and stories about, the threat of terrorism, asking why such actors do not do more violence might seem surprising, spurious or even inappropriate.

This relative inattention to restraint is problematic, however. First, it represents an important shortcoming in efforts to understand and explain terrorism and political violence, particularly if we subscribe to the basic axiom that effective theory should account for the absence, or at least the scarcity, or low intensity, of a given phenomenon, as well as its presence.[7] Second, it deprives us of opportunities to generate crucial insight and understanding about how to prevent and reduce such violence.[8]

The aim of this Special Issue therefore is to stimulate and advance research and policy understanding about the processes of restraint in terrorist groups and radical milieus: about how and why members of terrorist groups and radical milieus, in many cases, *choose* to engage in less violence than they could, about how, once these choices have been made, they are translated into practice, and how, once applied, these ‘brakes’ on escalation

[9] either work or fail. This Special Issue does this by drawing together a collection of theoretical and empirical articles that examine processes of restraint as they emerge and evolve, function and fail, within a range of very different contexts. This variation includes terrorist organisations engaged in more or less targeted campaigns of violence, ‘radical milieus’ [10] characterised by differing levels, styles and targets of violence, and more or less formalised groups engaged in civil conflict.

In this introduction, we first briefly outline our conceptual understanding of ‘restraint’. We then discuss in more detail what we believe researchers, policymakers and practitioners alike can gain by paying greater attention to restraint. Finally, we present the articles that make up the bulk of this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

Restraint: A Brief Conceptual Sketch

We understand restraint as a process whereby militants *choose* to drop, downscale or limit an attack or campaign, or adopt tactical or strategic innovations that lead them away from violence, whether that is due to the perceived risk of failure, anticipation of harsh government repression, concern about a possible backlash from their constituency, moral concerns, or a matter of tactical preference.

As the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* tells us, ‘restraint’ can refer both to externally imposed restrictions – as in a prisoner being put in restraints – and to something akin to self-control, discipline or self-restraint. As our primary interest is in how and why militants themselves contribute to establish and maintain parameters on their violence – in the ‘internal brakes on violent escalation’ [11] – our use of the term restraint is closer to the latter of these two meanings. When security agencies are able to detect and disrupt a terrorist plot, we consider that an ‘external brake’. The perceived risk of being detected, disrupted and punished by police and security agencies may make militants abstain from carrying out their violent plans – a mechanism generally known as deterrence.[12] Restraint emerges as the external brake is internalised as an understanding among the militants that committing certain acts is too risky and/or counter-productive and as they begin to adapt their plans accordingly.

Our interest in these ‘internal brakes’ does not stem from a belief that they are more important than external brakes, but from the fact that the former have, to date, received comparatively less scholarly attention than the latter. Neither is it our intention to suggest that these internal brakes should be studied in isolation: one of the reasons we prefer the term restraint to the term self-restraint is because of the ambivalence that the former affords with regards to the causal roots of the phenomena under consideration. Since an act of restraint implies some form of intention on the part of the person who deploys restraint, the concept of restraint helps to emphasise the agency of those involved in the decision-making process. This is important if we are to avoid overly structural and deterministic accounts of decision-making within militant groups. At the same time, however, we can and should acknowledge that restraint, like radicalisation or violence, will in most cases be a multi-causal, multi-variate phenomenon, the roots of which might lie within, for example, not just the individual psychology and biography of group members;[13] or the group’s ideology or collective identity;[14] but also the social ties between militants and their potential victims;[15] the mores and tactical appetites of their wider support base;[16] the interactions between group members and their various opponents;[17] or the (perceived) opening up of political opportunity structures.[18] This is important if we are to avoid de-contextualised accounts of how militants hold back from (further) violence.

Indeed, following the basic idea that political violence is always, in the final analysis, shaped by developments across multiple relational arenas,[19] we would expect that restraint within terrorist groups and radical milieus – or the weakening of restraint – is intimately related to group members’ interactions with their opponents and other relevant actors. For example, and as described in the literature on the policing of protests and demonstrations, if political opponents, the police or security services make use of repressive means generally deemed unjustifiable within that societal context, we would expect this to undermine processes of restraint, making attempted escalation of violence by the militants more likely and potentially producing spirals of violence.[20] Conversely, we would expect smart policing – e.g. making use of dialogue and facilitating self-policing – to reinforce emergent intra-group restraint and enable leaders to rein in the more hot-headed members of their groups and,[21] more broadly, we would expect that policing strategies that demonstrate clear respect for human rights will make it harder for members of militant groups to justify making recourse to violence.[22] Within this Special Issue, we have therefore encouraged the contributors to be attentive to the way that intra-group processes of restraint shape, and are shaped by, group members’ interactions with outside actors.

This way of thinking about restraint is broadly commensurate with how most researchers currently think about

strategic or tactical decision-making within terrorist organisations or radical milieus: as deliberative processes shaped by, and responsive to, but not determined by, developments within their operating environment, processes of organisational learning, and emergent organisational or movement cultures.[23] It is also broadly commensurate with how scholars have used the concept of restraint within research on other forms of political violence, such as genocide and mass killings,[24] and the use of force in civil wars.[25]

Since we understand restraint simply as a process that comprises holding back from doing more violence – i.e. we associate restraint with limiting violence, but not necessarily with non-violence – it follows that we can think of, and study, restraint as it operates at any level or scale of violence. Indeed, we argue it is important to do so in order to develop a strong theoretical framework with which to understand restraint. Restraint within the radical flank of a civil resistance movement that routinely breaks the law but rarely carries out interpersonal violence will look different to restraint within an international terrorist organisation that has carried out multiple mass casualty attacks: within the former, restraint processes might cluster around debates about whether or not, and the conditions under which, property damage can be justified; while in the latter case it might centre on debates about whether or not to undertake more indiscriminate lethal attacks.[26] Nonetheless, in both cases, what is taking place is a negotiation around the parameters of what is, or is not, ‘appropriate’ [27] according to a series of strategic, moral and broader cultural criteria.

Exploring processes of restraint across such different cases can open up important and potentially insight-rich avenues of inquiry about whether similar forms of restraint operate and are more or less effective at different starting levels of violence, and about the generalisability of insights across different types of groups engaged in different forms of violence. This is reflected in this Special Issue, where we have brought together cases with very different outer limits of violence.

Just as restraint is multi-causal and multi-variate, it is also multi-final. This is partly about the intentions of those who deploy restraint. In some cases, those who encourage restraint might intend to prevent any further escalation of violence; in other cases, they might seek simply to limit the extent of escalation, and in other cases still the intention might be to engender a broader shift away from the use of (higher levels of) violence.

What also matters is the ability of those who would deploy restraint – whether they are leaders or members of the rank-and-file – to influence the practice of other members of their group.[28] Brakes sometimes fail, particularly if they are not well-maintained, or if the conditions are not well-suited to braking; and sometimes if the brakes are hit too hard, or at the wrong moment, rather than slowing momentum, those applying the brakes might lose control.[29] And what happens then: if hotheads or splinter groups within the movement carry out violent actions that go beyond the confines of acceptable violence set by the leadership, do leaders respond with exclusion and punishment to maintain the boundaries, do they readjust the parameters of acceptable force by finding ways to justify or minimise the breach, or do they themselves reach for greater violence, thereby stimulating an intra-movement outbidding dynamic? It is quite possible that we can learn as much from cases of brake failure as we can from cases where they work. Again, this Special Issue contains cases both of brake success and brake failure, and a combination of the two.

Finally, we understand restraint as a process that might be more or less reactive or proactive.[30] Restraint might emerge and be most visible when individuals or factions are reacting to a perceptible shift towards violent escalation by other members of their group, or in the wake of instances of escalation after which other members of the group might seek to re-establish prior boundaries on their action repertoire: in effect, hitting the brakes once it feels that things are going too far or too fast. Restraint can, however, also take the form of more proactive innovations that might lead away from escalation, and even towards de-escalation, such as undertaking training that enables group members to maintain their discipline during encounters with opponents or the security services; developing protocols on the parameters of the acceptable use of force; or a strategic reorientation towards attempting to broaden their support base and achieve wider public legitimacy. It seems likely that a detailed understanding of restraint in any group, particularly over time, will require an analysis both of more reactive and proactive forms of braking, and of how these interact with one another.

Two recent attempts have been made to develop typologies with which to begin to interrogate these processes of restraint as they emerge, manifest and evolve within militant milieus. One of these was developed by Pete Simi and Steven Windisch, and comprised a study of the ‘barriers that hinder radicalization toward mass casualty violence’.[31] Based on life history interviews with former extreme right activists in the USA, and rooted within criminological approaches to the presence and non-presence of specific forms of criminal behaviour, their study focuses primarily on individual pathways, albeit situated within the wider cultural logics of the milieus within which those individuals were embedded, and how these pathways did, or did not, lead towards greater levels of violence. They identify five barriers to the adoption of mass casualty violence:

1. Mass casualty violence as counterproductive;
2. Preference for interpersonal violence;
3. Changes in focus or availability, whereby their interest in, and capability to, undertake more serious violence was inhibited either by their focus on drug and alcohol consumption or by non-movement related personal obligations;
4. Internal organizational conflict, whereby growing perceptions of hypocrisy and in-fighting within the movement eroded individuals' commitment to the movement;
5. Moral apprehension and, in particular, a 'failure to employ moral disengagement'.[32]

The other typology was developed by Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook and Graham Macklin. Their typology is based on documentary analysis of three contrasting case studies: the British and international jihadi milieu from 2001 to 2016; the British extreme right during the 1990s, and the animal liberation movement in the UK between the mid-1970s and the end of the 1990s. In contrast to the typology developed by Simi and Windisch, this typology centres analytical attention on the group level, and on the practices through which members of militant groups contribute to establishing and maintaining the parameters on their own violence, either in the form of resisting or pre-empting escalation, or by exploring less violent alternatives. It also attempts to operate at a sufficiently high level of abstraction as to be suitable for the analysis of restraint regardless of the base level of violence within the milieu under analysis. Like Simi and Windisch, however, they also develop a descriptive typology comprising five intersecting categories – in this case based on the logics on which the observed 'brakes' worked – and there is some noticeable overlap between the two typologies. They identified the following 'brakes':

1. Strategic brakes that work on concerns that certain forms of escalation are likely to be ineffective or counter-productive;
2. Moral brakes that work on concerns that certain forms of violence directed at particular targets contradict their ethical principles;
3. Ego-maintenance brakes that work on doubts about whether particular forms of violent escalation are commensurate with established in-group identities;
4. Out-group definition brakes that relate to processes of boundary softening such that some members of out-groups come to be perceived as potential allies, supporters or, at least, not an existential threat;
5. Organisational brakes that relate to considerations of organisational survival and the institutionalisation of the limits on violent escalation.[33]

One of the goals of this Special Issue is for contributors to engage with, critique and advance these typologies, and to develop alternative or complementary conceptual frameworks with which to advance our understanding of restraint in terrorist groups and radical milieus.

What is to be Gained by Studying Restraint?

As indicated above, part of the answer to this question is simply that it can help us to develop a fuller and more compelling account for observable patterns of violence – or non-violence – involving terrorist groups and radical milieus. Serious, and in particular lethal, violence by terrorist groups and radical milieus thankfully remains a fairly rare phenomenon, and where we see greater concentrations of such violence it tends to be closely intertwined with wider armed conflicts. In 2018, just 10 countries accounted for 87% of the total 15,952 global deaths from terrorism,[34] with 95% of global deaths from terrorism occurring in countries experiencing other forms of violent conflict: a figure that increases to 99% 'when countries with high levels of state sponsored terror are also included'.[35] During 2002 – 2018, there were just 317 deaths from terrorism in North America: in Europe (including Turkey) there were 2,296, during the same period.[36]

While part of the explanation for the relative scarcity of terrorist incidents and deaths from terrorism relates to the capabilities of many states to inhibit such incidents, it is clear that the decision-making of members of terrorist groups and radical milieus themselves is also part of explanation. Not only does one not have to look hard to find many reminders of the limitations of even the most extensive law enforcement and intelligence systems when it comes to inhibiting the emergence or escalation of political violence, but most of the evidence indicates that even within terrorist organisations the decision to deploy or escalate violence is rarely taken

lightly,[37] and that such decisions often become a focus of considerable, and sometimes ultimately terminal, friction and factionalisation, whether we are talking about groups committed to armed struggle [38] or protest groups who rarely go beyond brawling with their opponents or with one another.[39] That this should be the case is not surprising: one of the most consistent themes running through the empirically informed scientific literature on terrorist groups and radical milieus is that those who engage with such groups and activities by and large are not psychopaths hell-bent on destruction, but rather for the most part are political actors pursuing a series of more or less clearly-defined political, personal and sometimes economic objectives, through an evolving repertoire of action.[40] If we were studying any other type of political actor, we would want to be able to explain all of their tactical and strategic choices.

An enhanced understanding of restraint also has clear practical relevance. First, an effective understanding of restraint offers opportunities to refine analyses of the risk of violence. It could, for example, be used to develop a more precise understanding of where within radical milieus escalated violence is more or less likely to come from; of what or who it is that is holding back the use of greater violence and, by extension, the conditions under which that restraint is more or less likely to hold.[41] Where understanding restraint might be particularly valuable here is in mitigating against the over-estimation of risk and the economic, strategic, political and moral costs that such over-estimation of risk can entail.

Second, paying attention to restraint encourages and can enable a more 'holistic approach' [42] to the prevention and reduction of political violence by conceptualising the members of terrorist organisations and radical milieus as potentially part of 'the solution'. In practical terms, this might translate, for example, into police, security services and other agencies integrating questions about how to foster or reinforce internal processes of restraint within militant groups, or at least how not to disrupt them, within their strategic and operational planning. We believe that such approaches, which 'work with' rather than 'against' some of the characteristics of such groups, can provide benefits both in terms of effectiveness and efficiency.

Third, as noted above, debates around which tactics to use often comprise a source of tension within militant groups, particularly when, as tends to be the case, they are infused with broader internal power struggles. As such, and as the contributions to this Special Issue illustrate, observing processes of restraint provides a rich opportunity to gain insights about intra-group dynamics and, in particular, of emergent tensions and fault-lines within some of these groups. Such information and insights are likely to be of considerable strategic relevance to those interested in influencing the actions of such groups.

Fourth, paying attention to processes of restraint can help us to avoid overlooking the basic deliberative processes that take place within these groups, or indeed the basic humanity of (most of) the people who comprise them. This is not *just* an ethical position: however abhorrent we might find certain groups, we are likely to understand them better if we understand them as individuals, as human beings and all that this implies, rather than falling back on demonisation and stereotypes.[43]

All of this comes with a note of caution, however. As discussed above, restraint is a multi-causal, multi-variate, multi-form and multi-final process – in other words: it is complex. It is therefore important that we take a realistic and intellectually honest approach to the sorts of claims that we might make, and with what degree of confidence. Policy makers and practitioners quite understandably want tools and assessments that they can use to inform their decision-making, and academic researchers experience considerable professional, institutional and moral pressure to respond to such requests. To date, however, we are at the early stages of exploring the possibilities that this avenue of enquiry offers. We can provide conceptual tools: theoretically robust and coherent ways of identifying and describing emerging phenomena, and we can connect this with a wider set of insights about the escalation, de-escalation and non-escalation of political violence, but we wish to urge caution in reaching much beyond that, for the time being.

About this Special Issue

This Special Issue brings together articles that explore restraint as it manifests and functions in different groups, across different settings, and from different analytical perspectives. The articles contained within this Special Issue were drawn together across a dedicated workshop held at Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo, in January 2020, and dedicated panels organised at two international conferences: the European Consortium of Political Research and the Society for Terrorism Research, albeit the second of these was postponed due to Covid-19. Articles were selected for inclusion in the Special Issue based on a standard blind peer review process.

The cases from which the contributors draw are set within diverse national and historical contexts; include groups that take their ideological inspiration, or justification, from a range of different sources, including, among others, white racial nationalists, jihadists, separatists, anti-fascists and animal liberationists; and range across groups characterised by fairly strong and centralised command and control structures to groups in which members or affiliates operate through highly devolved structures, or through forms of leaderless resistance.

The cases also draw across groups that have deployed vastly different levels and styles of violence: from those clearly committed to armed struggle and mass casualty violence, to those where any form of interpersonal violence implies pushing at the parameters of what is deemed appropriate. In response to calls to broaden the range of cases from which scholars of terrorism in particular draw their insights and develop and test their theoretical understanding,[44] the editors have also included analyses of phenomena that, while still comprising political violence, tend to sit at or beyond the parameters of what is usually studied by terrorism scholars, such as ethnic violence, and political violence that falls short of thresholds usually used to define terrorism.

Finally, we have also sought to bring together articles that have different analytical starting points, both in terms of the contributors' primary disciplinary backgrounds and in terms of the basic units of analysis around which they organise their research. For some of the contributors, their initial point of entry into understanding and exploring restraint is the individual actor and why and how particular individuals within radical milieus come to hold back from further violence – and in doing so they build on a number of other studies that have begun to attempt to address these questions.[45] For other contributors, their analytical focus centres more on the group, and understanding how processes of restraint manifest in, evolve, and shape the tactical repertoires of specific groups, movements, scenes or milieus. For other contributors still, their starting point is spaces and/or places and understanding the uneven distribution of political violence by non-state actors. As this research agenda moves forward, we believe that the most productive avenues of enquiry are likely to be those that successfully integrate these different analytical starting points.

This introduction is followed by two further articles that survey the existing literature and begin to explore central conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues pertinent to researching restraint in terrorist groups and radical milieus. The first of these, by **Bart Schuurman**, is concerned primarily with the individual level of analysis. Schuurman argues that involvement in terrorist violence is in fact an unlikely outcome of radicalization processes, and that research needs to focus on why most individuals that engage with extremist groups or milieus never commit this type of violence. Like several other contributors, Schuurman reaches beyond Terrorism Studies as he sets out a series of insights from the existing literature that might be used to help to illuminate the differences between 'violent and non-violent radicalization outcomes.' He draws particular attention to the potential empirical and conceptual contribution of Criminology to understanding non-violent radicalization outcomes and the pathways that lead there. He also sets out a series of methodological considerations, and offers critical reflections on possible solutions to issues around data access and strategies of analysis.

In the second of the primarily conceptual and methodological articles **Leena Malkki** moves the focus to more meso- and macro-levels of analysis. Malkki's discussion centres on how analysis of the 'lack of political violence' and the uneven distribution of political violence across different settings can be leveraged to generate insight about the processes, mechanisms and conditions that generate or inhibit the emergence, escalation and continuation of violence. Malkki focuses in particular on qualitative and mixed methods research on terrorist violence where, she observes, the use of negative cases has been less frequently or extensively utilised than in the quantitative literature. The article explores how negative cases have been used within that literature to date and what methodological and conceptual lessons can be drawn from that literature, before going on to discuss a series of key opportunities and challenges for the effective use of negative cases studies within qualitative and mixed methods research designs within the field of Terrorism Studies.

The rest of the Special Issue comprises empirical, case study-based articles. The first three of these comprise case studies focusing on far right groups or milieus. **Tore Bjørgo** and **Jacob Ravndal** examine processes of restraint within The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), a militant and action-oriented National Socialist organization that aims to generate revolution and a pan-Nordic white state, mainly through extra-parliamentary struggle. The NRM asserts that violence will be necessary to achieve their revolutionary goal. To date, however, they have opted to deploy primarily legal means, condoning only limited forms of violence by its members. The article engages with Busher *et al's* 'internal brakes' framework, and examines the logics on which the brakes within the organisation appear to operate. The article argues that the NRM leadership does not, in principle, have any moral restraints against mass murder in the future since they claim that racial war is inevitable. Rather, they refrain from using such methods in the present due largely to strategic concerns that such violence would undermine their prospects of gaining popular support and lead to constraints on their opportunities

to propagate their political views via legal channels. The leadership is highly aware that the organisation might be banned, and activists imprisoned if they let violence escalate too much. The authors observe an important ambiguity in how this position plays out in practice. They note that the NRM states that members 'planning and carrying out of offensive violent actions will lead to exclusion' from the organisation. In practice, however, this policy does not seem to be implemented, at least 'not in a strict way,' and in fact there have been deliberate attempts by the NRM leaders to 'test and expand the legal boundaries on violence and threats against enemies' in order to create more opportunities for escalation. The authors argue that such attempts to expand opportunities for escalation should be resisted, not least through enforcement of the rule of law.

Graham Macklin examines the puzzle of why the extreme right milieu, 'saturated with violent rhetoric, doom-laden apocalyptic jeremiads [...] and the technical wherewithal to make good on such threats,' has not generated as much violence as it would appear capable of. He does this by using a case study of the British extreme right in the 1990s. The article traces how the British National Party tried to achieve electoral respectability while at the same time militants on its own 'radical flank,' belonging to Combat 18, engaged in violent street confrontations with anti-fascists. Macklin uses his case study to illustrate how the internal brakes on violence function across micro, meso and macro levels, situating individual processes of reflection within movement dynamics and the wider political context. He also draws attention to brake failure. In this case, it seems that such failure must partly be understood in the context of a movement leadership in a structurally weak position within its own movement as the 'moderates' struggled to counteract the enduring allure and influence of the radical flank.

The third contribution that deals with far right milieus is provided by **Steven Windisch, Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee** and **Matthew DeMichele**. Using life-history interviews with 91 North American-based former white supremacists, they examine how homicidal violence is perceived as either an appropriate or inappropriate political strategy. They observe that on the whole their interview participants had considered homicidal violence to be an inappropriate strategy, either due to perceptions that it was morally unjustifiable and/or that it was politically ineffective. They note, however, that homicidal violence could come to be considered an appropriate strategy if it was understood as a defensive measure within the frame of 'racial holy war' or 'RAHOWA'. They argue that capturing and understanding how white supremacists frame the permissibility of homicidal violence comprises an important step towards a better understanding of the 'upper limit' or thresholds for violence within this milieu.

The next three articles describe activism within various parts of global jihadi networks. **Donald Holbrook** examines internal debates, doubts and discussions among jihadi militants in the UK about the scope of jihadi violence. He does this through a study of private online conversations between 'Islamist militant sympathisers,' including ISIS supporters, and individuals who went on to plan acts of terrorism. Holbrook notes that the 'internal brakes' within the conversation threads are organised around four debates: group identity, targeting and exclusion, family and friendship dynamics, and knowledge acquisition. His analysis indicates that while participants in these threads were consistent in their support for mass-casualty terrorism, there were several points of disagreement around issues such as the targeting of members of the faith community, and the legality and morality of public executions. It does not seem, however, that these differences undermined in-group cohesion. Holbrook also draws attention to the multi-final nature of restraint dynamics, observing that it is not clear that the violence was simply abandoned as a result of these debates, but may rather have been redirected.

Silvia Carenzi examines the targeting choices of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qa'ida's former affiliate in Syria, and in particular what appears to be the increasingly local focus of their action over time. While acknowledging that ideology plays an important role in shaping the strategies of militant groups and their definition of enemies and, by extension, appropriate targets, Carenzi's analysis foregrounds the importance of militants' interaction with other actors and the environment, and with that their understanding of emerging opportunities and threats. Drawing on the literature on social movements, she conceptualizes the increasingly local focus of HTS as a form of 'downward scale shift,' and discusses how such a conceptualization can enhance our understanding of how groups develop and sustain the parameters on the focus of their violence.

The third case study dealing with the global jihadi milieu shifts our focus to the North Caucasus. **Mark Youngman** examines the case of Kabardino-Balkarian Jama'at (KBJ) in Russia's North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Youngman describes the growing antagonism between an emergent overtly Islamic social movement and the religious and political authorities, and how this eventually results in the movement's leadership, and much of its membership, moving to a full-blown insurgency. What Youngman concentrates on in this article, however, are the limits on the violence that followed – arguing that if we are really to understand political violence it is not enough to observe simply that a group has 'crossed the Rubicon,' but also 'how they came to cross their particular Rubicon and how they behave on the other side.' While KBJ's campaign did develop into a full-blown insurgency, violence in Kabardino-Balkaria nonetheless remained considerably more

restrained than elsewhere in the region. He argues that four ‘brakes’ can help us to understand the more limited nature of violence here: the movement’s social origins and ties; the group’s attitudes to the moral permissibility of violence; their scepticism about the strategic benefits of violence; and the personal authority of leaders that enabled the other brakes to work. As Youngman observes, the case not only illustrates well the importance of intra-group processes of restraint in shaping conflict outcomes, but also the potentially high price that might be paid when external actors undermine or disrupt those processes.

The next two articles are concerned with left-wing milieus. In the first of these, *Nigel Copsey* and *Samuel Merrill* examine how militant anti-fascists in the USA understand violence and exercise restraint in their use of it: a timely topic given calls from prominent conservative and right-wing politicians to designate Antifa a ‘domestic terrorist organization,’ and the recent first case of a self-identified anti-fascist deploying lethal force (during an altercation with a Patriot Prayer supporter, in Portland, on 29 August 2020). Copsey and Merrill recognise that physical confrontation has a central place within the logic of Antifa. They argue however that despite this recent incident, and despite Antifa’s call to fight fascism ‘by any means necessary,’ the relative absence of the deployment of lethal violence by Antifa activists stands in stark contrast to some of their political opponents. To explain this, they explore how restraint, both physical and rhetorical, is embedded within the movement culture and strategy of action, and how processes of intra-movement ostracization have been used to uphold restraint even at a time of intense confrontation with their political opponents.

Raquel da Silva and *Ana Sofia Ferreira* then discuss restraint within three armed left-wing organisations that operated in Portugal both before and after the 1974 April Revolution that overthrew the *Estado Novo* regime. Based on interviews with former militants, they explore how these research participants remember and recount the restraint that characterised their organisations’ tactical repertoires, and how the outer limits of violence for each of these organisations was intimately related to the specific socio-political situation prior to, and after, the end of the dictatorship. In doing so, they trace how restraint from lethal violence, particularly prior to 1974, was rooted in perceptions of such violence as both counterproductive and immoral. This changed as parts of the radical left milieu became disillusioned with the transition process, with a small faction adopting the use of targeted killings as part of their action repertoire, albeit they continued to reject the use of indiscriminate killing. In doing so, the authors draw our attention to the interactions between intra-group processes of deliberation and developments within the wider political context, and how this shaped the changing operation of restraint within the same movement over time.

The final three articles are based on cases that encompass political violence associated with separatist militancy, animal liberationism and ethnic violence. *John Morrison* examines restraint in the context of the Real IRA (RIRA), focusing on the sporadic use of violence by the RIRA in the years after the Omagh bombing of August 1998, one of the most lethal attacks of The Troubles. Morrison discusses the intersection of external pressures – the post-Omagh response from the legislature and security services – with ‘internal brakes,’ and situates this theoretically in relation to political organisation theory and the primacy of organisational survival. The article emphasises the importance of, and need for, conceptual frameworks that are able to capture and articulate the dynamic interactions between external pressures and internal decision-making processes.

Rune Ellefsen and *Joel Busher* explore processes of restraint and their failure throughout the course of the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign. They argue that even at this ‘high-water mark’ for militant animal rights activism, restraint within this campaign was evident in a series of innovations away from more militant tactics at the outset and during the final stages of the campaign, and in the resistance to the use of interpersonal violence across the campaign, even in the face of a significant escalation of repression and policing. In tracing the dynamics of this restraint, the authors observe however that there is a difference between the processes of innovation away from violence and the processes whereby activists maintained the outer limits of their action repertoire: while the former appear to be heavily contingent on developments within the activists’ operating environment and the general fortunes of the campaign, the latter are associated with the basic logics of the campaign and therefore less contingent on external developments. This, they argue, has potentially significant implications for understanding how restraint functions and sometimes fails: even as ‘brakes’ less deeply rooted within the underlying logics of the campaign might be loosened, any resultant escalation might still be limited by those brakes that are less contextually contingent and more deeply rooted within the underlying logic and culture of the movement.

In the final article, *Sarah Jenkins* considers how one can explain lower local levels of violence within the context of episodes of ethnic violence in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan. As Jenkins observes, there are often important sub-national variations in the onset, intensity, and duration of violence, as well as individual-level variance in participation and non-participation. Explaining this variation is likely to have both theoretical and practical relevance. Drawing on field research in neighbourhoods that comprised ‘pockets of peace’ during episodes of

ethnic violence in both countries, Jenkins argues the emergence and effectiveness of restraint in these cases is closely associated with strong, cross-cutting social ties. Such ties foster restraint in three ways: by making interpersonal violence more difficult in the first place; by disrupting emergent us-them distinctions as the episode gains momentum; and by facilitating coordination and cooperation among community leaders.

There are limits of course to what can be achieved in one Special Issue of a journal. Each of these articles generate as many questions as they resolve: about, for example, the applicability of findings across different types of movements, across different phases of organisational or campaign cycles, or to different forms of political violence. Nonetheless, we hope that this collection of articles will provide a valuable contribution towards, and will inspire further research into, generating a better understanding of the dynamics of restraint in terrorist groups and radical milieus and how such understanding can help us to respond more effectively and sustainably to different forms of political violence.

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